



5 Role-Playing

Writing and Performing Beyond the Classroom

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INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we discuss how students are using three role-playing activities to explore informal storytelling, meet new people and craft a sense of themselves as writers, performers, and gamers. Unfortunately in the popular media, online role-playing is usually presented as something for students to avoid, and writing about mainstream fictional characters can sometimes be viewed as obsessive and childish. These “stranger danger” and “childish” discourses are just one side of the coin and this chapter will highlight how aspects of role-playing, such as the interactive and collaborative storytelling aspects, can appeal to teachers and their students.

WRITING AND PERFORMABLE PRACTICES

One concern regularly expressed by adults about young people's use of technology is that technology replaces other types of activities—such as reading and writing—that are highly valued in schools. Additionally, educators, employers, and parents alike have lamented the communication practices kids and teens use in their everyday lives—such as writing informal e-mails, blog posts, status updates, or *tweets* to keep up with friends and abbreviating words for ease of texting on one's mobile phone. It seems that the ways in which schools teach students to communicate and expect

students to communicate and the ways in which students actually use media and technology to connect to one another are at odds. Instead of perpetuating this divide, educators can pull from the written and performable practices of role-playing to engage students. In this chapter, we will discuss different examples of online role-playing, including

- **Role-playing games**, sometimes referred to as RPGs, in which players take on a role or character through which they define their actions in a game
- **Role-playing Web sites** in which participants write as a specific character
- **Fan fiction Web sites** in which participants write stories about characters from a literary canon

ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

In role-playing games, participants become characters in a **game world** and collaboratively attempt to accomplish specific goals within a particular setting. The board game *Dungeons and Dragons* is a classic example of a role-playing game that has been around since the 1970s. Similarly, online role-playing games are sites for players to act out characters and work on specific tasks. Players can maneuver their characters to start quests, to initiate combat, to train, and to become more powerful and sophisticated characters as the game progresses. For instance, *World of Warcraft* is a **massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG)** that currently boasts over 11 million players worldwide. Players create characters through which they will explore and participate within the game world. During gameplay, players band together to complete quests and fight monsters.

MYTH: Role-playing activities are forms of child's play and should not be condoned for older adolescents.

REALITY: Professor Henry Jenkins (2006a) and his co-authors suggest role-playing is a fundamental new literacy skill. They argue that playing or writing about a character can offer one the capability to understand issues from multiple viewpoints, to digest information, and to problem solve.

Role-playing games of all kinds offer players an immersive and intensely social experience that, for many players, is a key part of the games' draw. Many role-playing games follow in the footsteps of *Dungeons and Dragons*

and are set in medieval times and incorporate fantasy elements, such as nonhuman characters and magical abilities. In most cases, the lore of the game is deep and intricately connected to gameplay. The work of understanding and exploring the unique settings found in role-playing games can spark creativity and encourage flexible thinking in young people.

When Jessica hears the term role-playing games, she automatically envisions a game set in medieval times. This is probably due to the influence of J. R. R. Tolkien, whose ring trilogy led to a board game called *Dungeons and Dragons*, considered by most to be the oldest and most popular role-playing game. With the advent of computers and then the Internet, these games led to online role-playing games, which is why so many of them seem medieval in setting.

A TEACHER'S RETROSPECTIVE

Adventures With Role-Playing Games

By Andy Maul, Educator

Role-playing games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* often seem to carry a certain stigma: They are often thought to be the province of nerds, and others on the peripheries of normal social conduct. They carry an image of Tolkienesque swords and sorcery, branding them a bit uncool by the standards of some. And . . . all right, I'll admit it: I was a bit of a nerd growing up. Still am, in some ways. But I think I turned out pretty well, and looking back on my experiences with role-playing games, I must say they were a constant delight, that enriched my life in a number of ways.

At first RPGs (role-playing games as those in the know call them) mainly provided a way for me to interact with other people like me: introverted, bright, and perhaps a bit weird, or original, to be more kind. They also appealed to my very active imagination: My friends and I would create worlds together, populating them with as many beautiful and horrible and just bizarre things as we could come up with, and we would weave stories in those worlds. For at their heart, role-playing games are simply interactive storytelling: One of us would take the role of world-builder while the others would take on the roles of specific characters in the story, much like a director and his actors on the stage. Noncoincidentally, role-playing games would lead me to a love of both theater and creative writing in later life.

The stories we shaped were reflections of our own worlds but vastly exaggerated. As I first came to understand the tragedies of world politics, our villains became despotic rulers, and later cunning manipulators. As I was first introduced to the horrors of middle-school romance, beautiful (and sometimes terrible) heroines took stage. When I was young, the characters I played were mostly idealized

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versions of myself, but as I aged I became interested in a wider variety of heroes; sometimes, it was the characters least like me who were the most fun to play, as they allowed me to take on a dramatically different perspective. This, I believe, had a profound impact on the way I was able to view human interaction. While I have by no means mastered the art of perspective-taking, I do think role-playing games gave me a broader view of people's motivations and personalities.

Online gaming has taken this all to a new level. In a game such as *World of Warcraft* I take on a specific role, and I need to understand how my character's abilities work so that I am able to use them effectively in pursuit of my goals. For especially challenging missions I need to team up with friends, who play different characters—and then I need to understand not only my abilities and their abilities but also how they interact and how we can effectively be more than the sum of our parts.

In addition to the strategic element of *World of Warcraft*, there's also the acting-storytelling element. I find myself acting out improvisational scenes, fully in character, with other gamers—many of whom I don't know. The actual players I'm interacting with could be anywhere or anyone and this lends an additional thrill to the shared world we're creating. Sometimes I might bond with other players enough to learn more about them, and through this I've made friends literally all around the globe even if I haven't met most of them in person.

In addition to how many happy memories they've given me, I do think role-playing games have enriched my life. Telling stories interactively, acting out characters, thinking strategically and cooperatively, and connecting with others around the world has been thrilling and unexpectedly educational. I do regret that many kids will shy away from these types of games in the rather harsh social environment of primary and secondary school because I do think role-playing games can hold interest in value for a wider range of people than so-called nerds. In fact my wife—the very antithesis of a nerd—has recently found absolute delight in the *World of Warcraft*, as foreign as it must have seemed to her at first. Now it's she who asks if we can game together, taking on our roles as heroes and saving the world from whatever happens to be threatening it today. Nerdy? Perhaps. But somehow role-playing games are bringing me just as much joy and fulfillment today as they did the first time I heard of elves and dragons and I suspect, in some form, they always will.

Andy's literate experiences with role-playing games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* are important to analyze. He explained how, with friends, they collaboratively produced creative stories and developed and acted out characters. Not only did these experiences help Andy learn how to construct a narrative, but he also credited these experiences with fostering his love of theater and creative writing and with an ability to consider and empathize

with different perspectives. Being literate in school in a number of subject areas requires that students appreciate different genres, work together in groups, and be able to think strategically to solve problems. Fleischer, Wright, and Barnes (2007) add that *Dungeons and Dragons* gamers cultivate "traditional print literacies such as story writing, vocabulary building mathematics, map reading" and that participation supports "enthusiasm for reading both fiction and nonfiction texts" (pp. 156–7). Additionally, the authors argue that online computer games, such as *World of Warcraft*, continue to reinforce and inspire print-based literacies through the reading and writing of supplemental material. Adults who ignore these literate practices end up dismissing role-playing games and the potential of these games to support school-based literacy practices.

Role-playing is a beneficial educational activity that should be utilized with students of all ages. Here's why. Our sense of self-identity is not based on a one-sided relationship with the world. That is I cannot define myself purely in relation to myself—I am always interacting with the outside world, especially with family, friends, colleagues, students, and parents. For teens, it is essential to understand and reflect on how one's sense of identity is constantly adjusting to how one appears to others. Using role-playing activities in classrooms can make this process, which is often naturalized and left unquestioned, highly visible. Because the characters in role-play activities are separate from students' own identities, it may be easier for students to do this kind of critical and reflective work, practice that can later be applied to understanding their own identities and relationships in the "real" world.

For instance, to play Romeo in Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*, students must understand the character of Romeo: his family, his background, his desires, and his strengths and flaws as a friend and a lover. This kind of reflection involves hypothesis testing, that is it grants the performer a chance to think about what could happen with Romeo as well as what he would hope will happen with his relationship with Juliet. This resonates with Andy Maul's experiences with *Dungeons and Dragons* in which he had to understand his character's abilities and those of the other characters in order to effectively play the game. Additionally, taking an active role in playing a character also allows students to manipulate their fictional world and appeals to the imagination. These experiences can be very empowering for students.

ROLE-PLAYING THROUGH WRITING

In addition to their role-playing roots in games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, MMORPGs such as *World of Warcraft* and *Everquest* have

emerged from a tradition of role-playing games specific to online communities. These communities, called **multiuser dungeons (MUDs)**, emerged in the very early days of the Internet (before it was the World Wide Web), and provided players with a virtual space for social interaction based on textual commands and descriptions. Much of this interaction made its ways into later versions of online role-playing games. Textual role play in which participants write as specific characters also persists in online communities. Some of these role-playing sites are popular among kids, as these sites usually offer a skeleton of a story and role players then take on the task of writing the story through the interactions of their characters. With the help of other role players, the story then grows into a sophisticated, detailed work of imagination written by numerous authors, not just one. This is a chance for participants to develop favorite characters off of the paper and breathe life into him or her, as one role-playing site suggests.

Some text-based role-playing sites are based in fantasy worlds constructed from scratch by the participants. Others offer up characters from popular media for players to "claim." For example, on the popular online journal site Live Journal, one can find role-playing communities based on *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, and various **anime** series. Panfandom role-playing sites, which incorporate elements from a number of series, are also gaining popularity. Like fan fiction (discussed later in this chapter), text-based role-playing is an interest-driven practice that offers young writers an opportunity to play with preexisting characters and story elements, reworking, remixing, and extending the stories in meaningful and creative ways. What makes role-playing sites different from fan fiction is that multiple players author them.

Just like MMORPGs and offline role-playing games, text-based role-playing sites are intensely social experiences for participants. For young writers, role-playing Web sites can be said to offer a "third place." C. J. Pascoe defines a "third place" as a place other than home or school where teens can hang out. With role-playing Web sites, teens virtually "hang out" around the writing of stories—their own fictional stories in which they write the characters into being through the construction of their personalities, their likes and dislikes, and even their underlying psyche. Essentially these Web sites become places in which kids can connect with people who are also interested in fiction writing, gain feedback on their written work, and enjoy being creative. Now we turn to a specific example from C. J. Pascoe, who describes the interest-driven experiences of a teenager named Clarissa on a role-playing Web site.

STORIES FROM THE FIELD

You Have Another World to Create

Teens and Online Role-Playing Web Sites

By C. J. Pascoe, Sociologist

As I was reading *The New York Times*, an article about teenagers' use of public libraries as hangout spots caught my eye. In it, experts bemoaned the growing lack of "third places," in other words, places which weren't home or school, where teens could engage in a time honored tradition of American adolescence, hanging out. Indeed as we perceive that our streets grow more dangerous, as suburban family life increasingly takes place in atomized homes, and the amount of public spaces decline, public or quasipublic places where teens can socialize appear infrequently. In talking to teens about their technology use, it seems that the Internet offers a form of this third place. While not a physical space, for those teens who have access to the Internet, in a variety of ways, from the ubiquitous MySpace to online game sites, it provides a form of a third space, a semipublic place for teens to hang out. As with many teen hangouts, adults are nervous about teens' activities when they are online. But most of the teens I've talked to about their Internet practices tell me that their online activities look a lot like their offline lives. They chat with their friends, flirt, find the latest "cool" site, watch videos, play games, and download music.

Clarissa*, a 17-year-old growing up in a working class suburb of San Francisco, is one of the many teens who uses the Internet as a third place. Like most of the teens I talk to, Clarissa checks her MySpace site daily, looking for messages from her friends, updating pictures or adding other content. Clarissa's primary hangout site is not MySpace though. She is an avid online role player and spends most of her time on her favorite site, Faraway Lands*, with her two best friends, also role players. Their online role-playing is not about murder and mayhem but about trying out varieties of selves, informal storytelling, meeting new people and crafting a sense of themselves as writers. On this site they can hang out in a manner that isn't always possible in any sort of constructive way in their physical community, one plagued by problems of crime and gangs.

Clarissa describes Faraway Lands as a "really nice quality, good, inviting, comfortable, fun place to be." She finds it to be a community of supportive friends who have high writing standards and creativity. Members must write intricate character applications to join the site. These character applications are essentially 25,000 word descriptions of a given character, its race, its history, and its location. For Clarissa, an aspiring writer and filmmaker, this site allows her to use "words like clay to create whatever stories suit your fancy." She finds the community to be a "nurturing" one, in which she is "able to fully develop intricate personalities and plots that in computer games, sports, and academics are simply not possible."

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Faraway Lands is Clarissa's third place, a place where she can make friends, hang out, chat and write fantastical stories. It's both an escape from the physical world of school and an extension of her offline social life. Internet forums such as Faraway Lands offer places for teens to both hang out and create. Clarissa sums it up aptly: "This is just a nice little world that you can control and you can make your own drama. But you can do it in a creative in-depth storytelling fun way that's all artistic. You have another world to create. It's fun."

C. J. Pascoe's vignette was originally published online in January 2007 on the Digital Youth Web site, the online home of the Kids' Informal Learning with Digital Media project at <http://digitalyouth.ischool.berkeley.edu/node/65>.

*Please note that the names of individuals and any Web sites mentioned in this article are pseudonyms and were designed to protect the privacy of the research participants.

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MOTIVATING FACTORS OF ROLE-PLAYING

- Students choose the roles they are interested in playing
- There are many types of role-playing: costume play, live action role play, online role play boards, role-playing games, MMORPGs, and many more
- Students can have membership in a collaborative, online community
- The community can nurture an identity as an artist, writer, and participant through comments and critique
- Students are not graded! They receive feedback from peers on their ability to write/perform/play a character. In this sense, feedback is formative and (often) immediate
- There is a low risk of failure (if your style doesn't fit the site, you can always find another site to join)
- Mentorship from other members of the game can help participants develop style and skills for participation

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND CLASSROOM PRACTICES

In C. J. Pascoe's *Story From the Field*, Clarissa described her online writing experiences as something she does in her spare time, where she can be "creative and write and not have to be graded." With regards to school, she states that her creativity doesn't really count since she is doing it for a grade. Additionally, Becky discussed how fan fiction writers she interviewed felt comfortable taking more risks with ungraded writing than with writing produced for school, and that in many cases, "the feedback a writer receives from his or her audience is much more meaningful than a grade on a school essay."

When Jessica was teaching high school English, she was obligated to teach her students traditional academic writing, usually five-paragraph essays and

other derivatives, but she also felt compelled to nurture her students' sense of themselves as writers. Jessica found that some of her students were afraid of "academic writing" even though these same students were avid writers of journal entries, song lyrics, texts, and online posts. She searched for ways to include multiple genres of writing in her classroom in the hopes that students could view themselves holistically as writers and then, together, take them on a collective journey to understand and engage in academic writing. And this problem is not limited just to English teachers. Math teachers have to confront their students' fear of math and researchers in science education have long argued for the need for students to see themselves as a part of the scientific community in order to demonstrate deep science conceptual understanding. Diana J. Arya, a science educator, discusses below how to invite students in the discipline of a subject area, and for science, this includes taking on the roles of "question maker" and "data analyzer."

A TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE

Breaking Through the Mystique of Science

Inviting Students Into the Roles of "Question Maker" and "Data Analyzer"

By Diana J. Arya, Science Educator

Many students believe science class can only be conquered by the smartest of the bunch, placing subjects like chemistry and physics on a mystical pedestal. A while back, I asked my students to draw a scientist. Almost all of these drawings were of old white men who wore lab coats and glasses. This view of science fuels one of the greatest misconceptions about scientific discovery and knowledge—that it has nothing to do with real life or people like themselves. Many teachers have tried to combat this debilitating belief by introducing scientific concepts within a familiar context. Professor and researcher Jay Lemke (1990) describes in his book, *Talking Science*, how a high school teacher introduces the concept of germ cell formation by engaging his class about a discussion of the 1950s cult movie *The Blob*. This initial discussion provides a space that invites all to actively participate in learning more about cell generation. I have witnessed and tried similar attempts for student engagement during my time as an urban middle school science teacher; my colleagues and I are not above donning costumes if we think it will be a useful hook for our students' focused attention. However, once the initial excitement of the hook wears off, many students revert to the standby belief that science is for the "brainiacs," and begin to doodle and daydream once more. Thus, the real questions are, how do I show my students that science is part of and relevant to their everyday lives? Or how can I convince them that science is not just for a few individuals, that we are all a part of the scientific community?

Unfortunately, the bulk of school science curricula present scientific knowledge as a collection of hard-set facts that somehow sprouted from the ground. While many classroom experiments resemble preplanned recipes, textbooks particularly fail to explicate the tentative, explorative nature of the scientific process (Bowker, 2005; Griffiths & Barman, 1995; Lederman, 1992; Niaz & Rodriguez, 2000; Popper, 1959). Thus, students see science as a collection of information rather than what it really is—an opportunity to ask questions about our world and to figure out a way to find an answer that may change over time. In his book, *Science in Action*, sociologist Latour (1987) explains how the “real science” of science is masked for those outside the community that engages in the discovery process. So our challenge as science teachers is to bring our students into the real science of science, which means knocking down the pedestal and eliciting questions that our students have about our world. The ultimate goal for me was to see my students draw themselves as scientists, and role-playing proved to be a powerful strategy for easing my students into the discovery process.

Just like trying on a lab coat, I asked my students to imagine that a friend of theirs showed them a rock that glowed. How would you try to learn more about this rock? I was impressed to hear their answers; several actually collected rocks and had much to tell. This is how I began the discussion of chemical reactants and radioactivity—through the discovery story of Marie Curie. Henri Becquerel showed Marie and her husband a rock he called uranium ore (also called pitchblende) that gives off a light bluish glow. Curie (1903) describes in her book, *Radioactive Substances*, how she came to understand the power that this glow represented and that it came from an element no one knew existed before—she called it radium. Curie’s natural curiosity and creative problem solving provided a meaningful context for learning concepts like elements, reactants, and atomic weight. For the chemistry labs I threw out the curricular recipes and asked my students what they would want to know about some given substances and how they would go about finding out the answers to their questions. In the beginning, I asked them to pretend they were Marie and Pierre Curie, faced with the unknown. Once I made this change in my instruction, I saw it—students were becoming scientists.

Marie Curie is only one of many scientists through which students could learn about the process of discovery. African American chemist George Washington Carver was a familiar name to my students of color, but they had no idea how he came to understand the utility of the peanut nor did they have a clue about his countless discoveries and inventions that had nothing to do with the peanut. I love to read aloud one of his letters addressed to a colleague in which he explains how he discovered a way to make cost effective paint from using ordinary clay—a familiar context with practical implications. It made the brainstorming session of potential cost-effective discoveries, e.g., a cheaper substance to fuel a car, with a follow-up researching session an easy project to facilitate because everyone was

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engaged and invested. George Washington Carver was no longer a distant, iconic symbol from the past; he was being reincarnated in my students, who all wanted to continue his love for discovery and learning about our world.

An important part of playing the role of scientists is the experience of perseverance. Discoveries do not usually happen easily, which can be discouraging. Most people do not know about the painstaking process of observation that led to Jane Goodall's discovery of tool use among primates, but she describes her experience in great detail within her book, *In the Shadow of Man* (1971). After reading about her trials and tribulations, I asked my students to imagine what she would do if she planned to study the wildlife in a nearby park. A great discussion ensued, involving spontaneous renderings of diagrams and charts that plotted out potential sites. Then came the day for the walking trip to the park—I was nervous. Would they take this as seriously as Goodall would? Yes, they did. Everyone was committed to absolute silence. A solid half-hour observation period with no talking, only looking, listening, and writing.

Asking my students to play the role of scientists helped me to begin the connection, and once the discovery process was familiar, there was evidence of students owning their own discoveries. I used the power of role-playing to buy each of my students a ticket into the world of science, and I hope they never leave it.

Deep Participatory Learning

Cynthia Lewis, a literacy educator, describes with her co-authors (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007) how deep, participatory learning involves “learning not only the stuff of a discipline—science content, for example—but also learning how to think and act something like a scientist, even if one does not enter the profession of science” (p. 19). Science teacher Diana Arya wanted her students to learn how to think and act like scientists and not conflate the discipline of science with only wearing white lab coats and glasses. For Diana, the discovery process is at the heart of being a scientist. In order to alter her students' view and engage them in deep, participatory learning, Diana relied on role-playing as a strategy for easing her students into the discovery process. By having students step into the shoes of famous scientists, they were able to engage in the discovery process through observation, questioning, researching, and writing.

It is extremely important for teachers to make explicit the practices within a discipline (or within a profession) such as science. Only through recognizing and enacting the practices of scientists can students come to understand how they are similar or different to other practices, say of an historian. These distinctions are essential, especially if students have a limited understanding of what scientists actually do and the real science

of science, such as how failures within experiments can provide important insight and turning points, is not explicitly discussed. It is this meta-awareness that allows students to take on new identities and recognize science practice; role-playing can provide an initial activity into identity development and deep, participatory learning. By making explicit the practices of a discipline, Diana's students can come to see themselves as a science kind of people (Lewis et al., 2007).